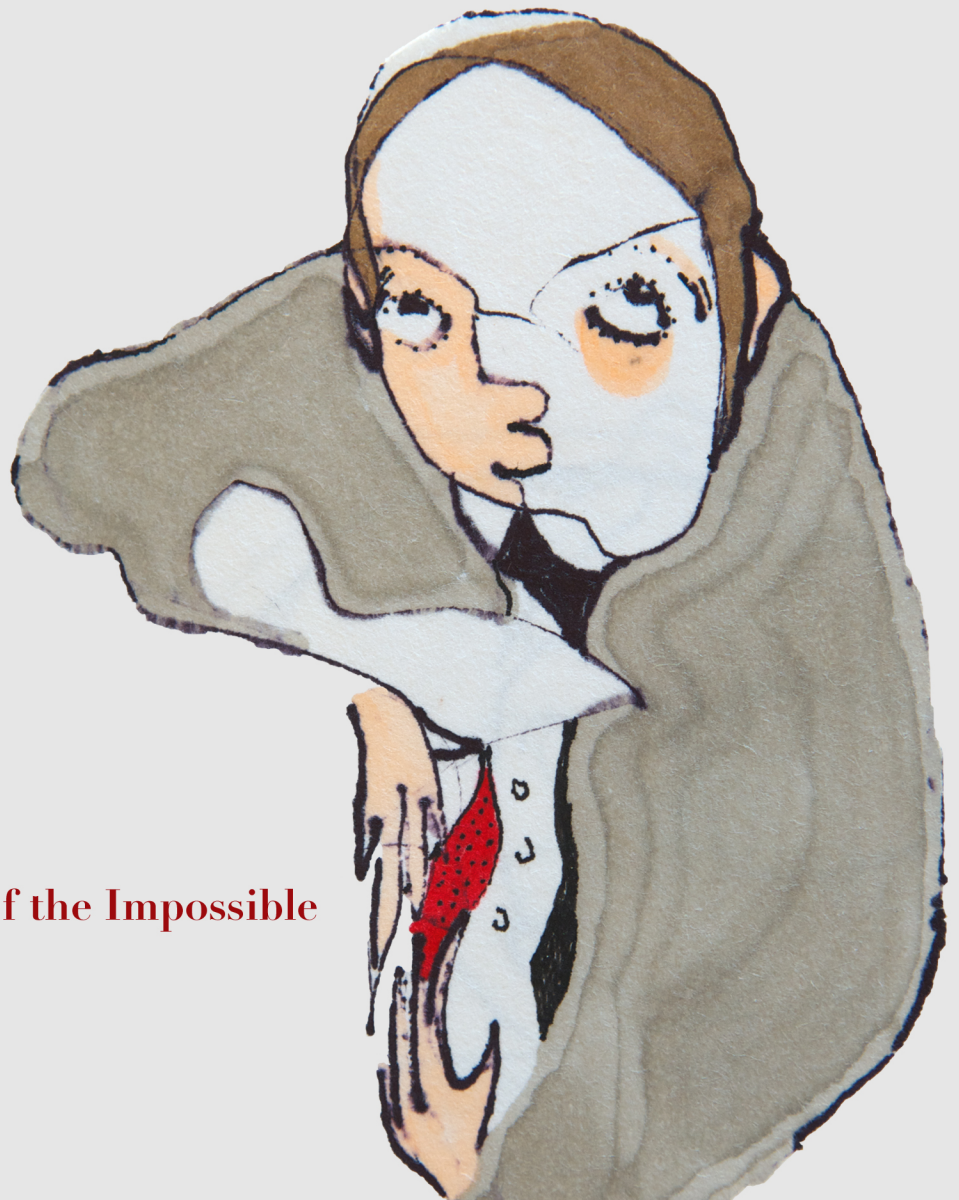


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## Synaesthesia and Transgression in *Story of the Eye*

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*Abstract: While Georges Bataille's "Story of the Eye" challenges many boundaries (pornography and art among them), his central concern was of the boundary between the possible and the impossible, or, what could be expressed in language. Though his novel has had a long critical history related to its unique narrative and thematic concerns, few have identified Bataille's linguistic constructions as an integral piece of his project to transcend the boundaries of possibility in his novel. Experimenting with unexpected sense-language descriptors in "Story," Bataille confronts readers with sensory experiences that exist outside the text—provoking a disruption in the normally separate spaces between reader, author, and text. Synaesthesia enables Bataille to trouble the divisions between the senses more strongly than any other literary device can, providing a greater opportunity to represent what would be otherwise impossible. A close reading of "Story," considered along with Bataille's theoretical work on the impossible, informs this paper's analysis of the "avant-garde" or transgressive/transcendent possibilities of synaesthetic language in Bataille's "Story."*

*Keywords: Georges Bataille, Story of the Eye, synaesthesia, sensory experiences, the impossible, transgression*



## Synaesthesia and Transgression in *Story of the Eye*

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Poetry removes one from the night and the day at the same time. It can neither bring into question nor bring into action this world that binds me.

—*Georges Bataille, Oresteia*<sup>1</sup>

Published in 1928 under the pseudonym “Lord Auch,” Georges Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*<sup>2</sup> has become a canonical text to literary theorists mainly for its pornographic narrative. Its outré prose has incited intense critical reflection on the connection between spectacle and profundity at the interstice of pornography and art.<sup>3</sup> While thematic transgression, especially in terms of sexuality, is clearly an important issue in Bataille’s text, this essay investigates Bataille’s transgressive project in *Story of the Eye* at the level of its language. In his essay “The Metaphor of the Eye,” Roland Barthes explains that Bataille’s transgressive project in *Story* must always transcend the thematic and leak into language language being the mode through which the thematic can be represented. Barthes suggests Bataille’s imagery is so important that *Story* should be considered as a poem, not a novel. By locating Bataille’s transgression in *Story* in his imagistic/metaphoric language, Barthes points out the disruptive power of the novel and its ability to impact readers.<sup>4</sup> While Barthes’ position on imagery strongly informs this paper, I suggest that the synaesthesia in Bataille’s *Story* has been overlooked as a literary technique that can more closely accomplish Bataille’s larger project to access the impossible through language.

Extending beyond Barthes’ metaphoric concerns, this paper will show how Bataille attempts to create a transcendent experience, in other words, an encounter with the impossible, for his readers by using synaesthetic language. Informed by Kant’s discussion of the sublime, I position Bataille’s formal experimentation with unexpected sense-language descriptors as a tool to disrupt the subjectivity of readers, suggesting sensory experiences that exist outside the text in an alternative space of sublimity, or perhaps, impossibility. Through a close reading of *Story*, along with Bataille’s theoretical work, this paper will interpret the “avant-garde” or transgressive/transcendent possibilities of synaesthesia. As *Story*’s narrator describes the

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Oresteia,” *The Impossible* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1991) 158-59.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye by Lord Auch*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987). Text was originally published in French in 1928 as *Histoire de l’œil*.

<sup>3</sup> See Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1972) 243.



“freedom of the senses” he felt while viewing the liquid Spanish sky, we can assume that Bataille intended to produce a similar effect in his readers, mingling sense and nonsense in an attempt to articulate the impossible.<sup>5</sup>

In a literary context, *synaesthesia* refers to a blending of different sensory experiences through metaphoric language. Colors can be described in terms of sound, odors can relate to sight images, and so on.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, synaesthesia must always refer to two or more senses juxtaposed together connected despite their dissonance. It is not surprising, then, that Bataille would seek to use synaesthetic imagery given his fascination with the connections between disparate images.

In “Coincidences,” the epilogue to *Story*, Bataille explicitly mentions his desire to investigate the connections between images. As he reflects on his writing, he realizes that key images in the novel are often a reflection of significant experiences in his life. As an example, he acknowledges an incident when he was terrified by a boy pretending to be a ghost under a sheet as the inspiration for Marcelle’s wet sheet in *Story*:

I realized there was a perfect coincidence of images tied to analogous upheavals.... I was astonished at having unknowingly substituted a perfectly obscene image for a vision apparently devoid of any sexual implication.<sup>7</sup>

Refracted and reimagined in the pages of *Story*, this innocent childhood memory is transformed into an intensely sexual moment. Since synaesthesia can marry different sensory experiences into one image, it becomes possible to imagine its usefulness to Bataille as a means of challenging the boundaries between these seemingly unrelated images that nevertheless share some transcendent connection.

Bataille’s personal narrative in *Story* provides evidence of his fixation with synaesthesia. In another explanation of his inspiration for *Story*, Bataille points out his obsession with a phrase overheard at the Concert Moyal: “God, how the corpse’s blood is sad in the depth of sound.”<sup>8</sup> Combining the image of death and blood with cavernous sounds, Bataille used this synaesthetic phrase in his earlier novel, *W.C.*, which was the preliminary version of *Story*. In that lost text, the phrase was used as a caption for an image of a disembodied eye transposed with a scaffold. When combined with the drawing, the phrase achieves an even greater synaesthetic effect: as the conflated image and sound of death in the text is then attached to a non-referential image of an eye, readers/viewers are forced to navigate between all of these sensory

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<sup>5</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 59.

<sup>6</sup> M. Abrams and Gary Galt Harpham, *Glossary of Literary Terms*, 8th ed. (Boston: Thompson, 2005) 323-24.

<sup>7</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 90-91.

<sup>8</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 98.



experiences at once. In this early text, Bataille collapsed the space between sounds and images; similarly, sense-unity is a key feature of his imagery in *Story*, although the synaesthetic images in *Story* are rather more complex.

Analyzing synaesthetic metaphors in *Story* is a difficult task given that very few phrases are fully synaesthetic, although much of the imagery suggests a sensory fluidity. Only two phrases in the text unmistakably approach complete sense-unity. The first is a description of Simone's experience playing with the priest's eyeball: "The caress of the eye over the skin is so utterly, so extraordinarily gentle, and the sensation is so bizarre that it has something of a rooster's horrible crowing."<sup>9</sup> Offering a complete vision of the possibilities of drawing distinct sensory experiences together, Bataille connects a rooster crow to the texture of an eye. In another moment, Simone articulates the importance of eggs, the ass, and urine in highly metaphorical imagery, describing "... a jet of urine 'a gunshot seen as light,'" with the image of urine evoking the sound of a gunshot.<sup>10</sup> Clearly synaesthesia functions in Bataille's work to draw out new and unexpected associations for the most important images of his text: the egg, the eye, and so on.

Bataille's successful attempts at synaesthesia offer striking examples of dissonant ideas brought together into one succinct image. When compared with the earlier example, "...the corpse's blood is sad in the depth of sound," both of the above synaesthetic examples "the caress of the eye" and "a jet of urine" create a more layered concept-image. Rather than using similar descriptors, Bataille pushes the comprehension of his readers to imagine the connections between different sensory experiences in these synaesthetic phrases.

To better understand the significance of Bataille's synaesthesia, I first examine his discussion of the limits of language in "The Oresteia." At the end of this short collection of poems, Bataille includes his own commentary on the simultaneous difficulties and possibilities of approaching the impossible through language, specifically through poetry. In Bataille's work, the impossible becomes a tantalizing possibility. Thus, Bataille's critical project emerges: how to write the impossible, unmentionable, and even unimaginable. Bataille's discussion in "Oresteia" suggests that poetry holds a unique ability to evoke the impossible. He writes that contrary to discourse, "poetry is a middle term, it conceals the known within the unknown: it is the unknown painted in blinding colors, in the image of a sun."<sup>11</sup> Bataille's emphasis on poetry as a tool to evoke strong images of the unknown bears a key importance to the discussion of synaesthesia in his work. If poetry, or poetic language, allows the closest proximity to the im-

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<sup>9</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 39.

<sup>11</sup> Bataille, "The Oresteia," 164.



possible (particularly through its ability to relate images), then Bataille must also emphasize the fact of this proximity.

This problem of proximal representation is made clear in *Story* through Bataille's synaesthetic failures. Despite a few examples of true synaesthesia, *Story* is filled with a vast number of phrases that are only suggestively synaesthetic. For example, Bataille employs rich imagery to describe the turbulent Spanish sky: "urinary liquefaction of the sky."<sup>12</sup> The liquid texture Bataille lends the yellow sky does not go quite far enough to produce a combination of senses—the liquid and the sky remain images, albeit dissonant ones. Another suggestive combination occurs in Simone's speech to the narrator, "You could smack her face with your come... till it sizzles."<sup>13</sup> Here, Bataille incompletely links a sizzling sound to an image of Marcelle's face; however, the two remain only vaguely linked, still only suggesting that "freedom of the senses" that he was so intent on developing in his work. In yet another example, "dementia itself had hoisted its colors on this lugubrious chateau,"<sup>14</sup> Bataille personifies and then lends a color value to dementia. Although these selections and more are not true examples of synaesthesia, they outnumber Bataille's actual synaesthetic moments and evoke equally powerful images, making them valuable to the discussion of synaesthesia in his work. Perhaps these "failed" synaesthetic moments reveal even more about Bataille's linguistic process than his successes do. Returning to the idea of proximal representation, Bataille's incomplete synaesthetic moments may provide evidence of the difficulty of representation—whereby language itself presents a limit to Bataille's wild imagination.

Bataille once acknowledged that his attempts to express the impossible through poetry were doomed to imperfection: "I approach poetry only to miss it."<sup>15</sup> Poetry, limited by existing systems of linguistic representation, will never be able to fully describe the impossible—a concept that is always already located outside of the text (and therefore possibility) but is nevertheless a central concern in Bataille's writings. In connecting the fundamental impossibility of representation back to synaesthesia, we see that although the combination of different sensory experiences together can hint at the impossible, synaesthesia must be limited by the possibilities of language. Where even perfect synaesthesia in Bataille's work may build complex and layered sensory experiences, what readers take away is difficult to quantify. The impossible that Bataille tries to express could be communicated through perfect synaesthesia, but it could be equally communicated in the failed attempt: what matters most is the resonance of the image for readers. Thus, the impossible must somehow exist in a space outside of the text. As

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<sup>12</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 65

<sup>13</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Bataille, "The Oresteia," 159.





readers attempt to understand these unexpected associations, they must necessarily draw upon sensory experiences of their own. Bataille's *Story* becomes a catalyst for an experience to be had in its interpretation.

Barthes emphasizes the way in which Bataille's unexpected metaphoric linkages produce a transcendent/transgressive linguistic form. After establishing that *Story* functions more as a poem than a novel, Barthes identifies the text's organization as a system of linked imagery, where the most important image strains (like the eye and its tears) are constantly being rearticulated and reimagined in new narrative situations.<sup>16</sup>

...the narrative is only a kind of flowing matter; a vehicle for the precious metaphoric substance: if we are in a park at night, it's so that a thread of moonlight can turn translucent the moist patch of Marcelle's sheet, which floats out the window of her room ... Even in the interior of each series, the narrative is a *form* whose constraint, fruitful on the same basis as the old metrical rules or the unities of tragedy, permits us to extend the terms of the metaphor beyond their constitutive virtuality.<sup>17</sup>

When Bataille's text uses poetic devices to move beyond conventional narrative concerns like plot, Barthes argues that a new potential is opened up for the imagery to escape its "constitutive virtuality," or to refer to something outside of the narrative. To better explain this effect, Barthes focuses on the play between metaphor and metonymy in Bataille's imagery. By identifying the way Bataille often uses the eye, the egg, tears, and urine in his metaphors and metonymic experiments interchangeably, Barthes articulates the effect as a disturbance:

...these associations are both the same and different; for metaphor, which varies them [eye, egg, etc.], manifests a regulated difference among them, a difference which metonymy, which exchanges them, immediately undertakes to abolish: the world becomes disturbed...<sup>18</sup>

While metonymy links disparate images together by contiguous association, the eruption of metaphor in *Story* constantly rearticulates the space of difference between these images. These shifts between the metaphoric and the metonymic constitute a sense of disruption in Bataille's text. The combination of metaphor and metonymy in *Story* places Bataille's imagery in a constant play of difference/contiguity. Barthes argues that these imagistic discontinuities produce "a technical transgression in the form of language."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Barthes 240.

<sup>17</sup> Barthes 243.

<sup>18</sup> Barthes 245.

<sup>19</sup> Barthes 246.



Building upon Barthes's argument that metonymic and metaphoric language open up the transgressive possibilities of language in *Story*, I suggest that synaesthetic imagery can occupy a similar if not more transgressive space than metaphor/metonymy with its unique ability to knit different sensory modes together through language. In the same way that metaphor and metonym are disruptive for connecting images within a text, synaesthesia connects the *sensory experiences* that always exist outside of the text. More than a "technical transgression in the form of language," synaesthetic imagery refers to what evades all linguistic representation: the sensory experience. The synaesthetic uses language to reassert the limits of language.

Although the dual notion of transcendence/transgression is evident linguistically in *Story's* imagery, what is more important to Bataille (and also less quantifiable) is what is happening outside of the text—synaesthesia's ability to evoke a transgressive/transcendent sensory response in the reader. Immanuel Kant identifies a similar play between the disruptive and the transcendent as the means of initiation into a sublime experience. Always operating outside of the limits of its medium (e.g., text, canvas), the sublime object functions to "agitate" the reader, while it also simultaneously confronts the reader with a vision of what exists outside the imagination:

... the mind feels agitated, while in an aesthetic judgment about the beautiful in nature it is in restful contemplation. This agitation (above all at its inception) can be compared with a vibration, i.e. with a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object. If a thing is excessive for the imagination (and the imagination is driven to such excess as it apprehends the thing in intuition), then the thing is, as it were, an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself.<sup>20</sup>

Transgressive because disruptive, but also transcendently suggestive, the sublime offers an apt vocabulary for understanding the effect of Bataille's synaesthetic imagery on readers. Referring back to Bataille's vision of poetry as a space to "reveal the power of the unknown,"<sup>21</sup> it becomes possible to theorize that the sublime experience is commensurate with the effect produced by synaesthetic imagery in *Story*.

In *Story*, Bataille introduces readers to a narrator who goes through a bildungsroman transformation during his sordid experiments with Simone. Many of his reactions to these experiences run parallel to Kant's description of the experience of the sublime, as in this scene, where the narrator reflects on the transcendence of his relationship with Simone.

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<sup>20</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Critique of Judgment: Explication of the Term Sublime," *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001) 526.

<sup>21</sup> Bataille, "The Oresteia," 164.





I was still extremely agitated.... We had abandoned the real world, the one made up solely of dressed people, and the time elapsing since then was already so remote as to seem almost beyond reach. Our personal hallucination now developed as boundlessly as perhaps the total nightmare of human society, for instance, with earth, sky and atmosphere.<sup>22</sup>

Combined with this “personal hallucination,” Bataille specifically emphasizes the agitation or disruption that the narrator feels at the same time he becomes aware of his transcendence. Echoing Kant, the recognition of sublimity must always be punctuated with anguish. Thematically, Bataille places a clear significance on the effect of the collapsing distance between the transgressive and the transcendent, as his narrator encounters the sublime with Simone. Although the experiences upset him, he realizes their power to initiate him into a new reality—one that runs parallel to the “total nightmare of human society.” Perhaps Bataille’s synaesthesia functions to evoke the same disruptive/transcendent effect for his readers through the manipulation of sensory linkages. I suggest that Bataille’s obvious project to achieve transgressive/transcendence in *Story* through the narrator’s experience operates according to the same logic that is more deeply embedded in *Story*’s synaesthetic language. In this way, the linguistic aspect supports his thematic experimentation—language becomes the original space for transgression/transcendence.

To trace out the connection between synaesthesia and the sublime, I refer to Jean-François Lyotard’s comment that language reaches sublimity only through “shocking combinations.”

The arts, whatever their materials, pressed forward by the aesthetics of the sublime in search of intense effects, can and must give up the imitation of models that are merely beautiful, and try out surprising, strange, shocking combinations. Shock is, par excellence, the evidence of something happening, rather than nothing, suspended privation.<sup>23</sup>

Although Lyotard does not deal with synaesthesia directly, the effect produced by “shocking combinations” of the senses, as he describes, bear similarities to Barthes’s description of disruption in *Story*. In Lyotard’s construction, the sublime literary experience creates a disruption through its unexpected linguistic combinations. At this point, the space is opened for the secondary function of sublimity to come into play: the shock from these combinations produces a new sense of possibility—evidence of “something happening.” A key synaesthetic phrase from *Story*, introduced previously, reflects the presence of “shocking combinations”

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<sup>22</sup> Bataille, *Story*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-garde,” *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 205.



and how they simultaneously suggest “something is happening” by opening up a new interpretive space: “The caress of the eye over the skin is so utterly, so extraordinarily gentle, and the sensation is so bizarre that it has something of a rooster’s horrible crowing.”<sup>24</sup> The linkage between a rooster crowing and the sensation of an eyeball on the skin does not follow linguistic convention. Furthermore, the unconventional, or in Lyotard’s vocabulary, “avant-garde,” association created by this synaesthetic moment demands to be interpreted by a similarly unconventional logic: perhaps, a logic of the impossible. Significantly, this logic is located outside the text and in the realm of sensory experience where one imagines the “something happening” should begin.

Lyotard goes on to describe this essential aporia of the avant-garde, the something happening, and the sublime. Linguistic transcendence is always located in an acknowledgment of the inability of language to fully represent what lies outside the text.

The art object no longer bends itself to models, but tries to present the fact that there is an unrepresentable; it no longer imitates nature, but is...the actualization of a figure potentially there in language.<sup>25</sup>

Synaesthesia can approximate what exists outside the text more closely than any other literary device Bataille employs, but we must not underestimate the fact that the synaesthetic refers to the senses, which are themselves imperfectly representable through language. As Lyotard’s above comment suggests, the sublime object will often emphasize its inability to be fully represented, always remaining the “figure potentially there.” The same problem exists commonly in Bataille’s synaesthesia—however sublime, his synaesthetic moments are still located within language, limited by the words available to him and even further limited by the comprehension of his readers.

Aware of this paradox, Bataille resolves to write from a space of nonknowledge, to articulate what exists outside all known systems (including the literary). As Bataille pushes for a new system of nonknowledge that would negate all existing systems of knowledge in *Story*, he challenges readers to imagine a language apt at expressing the impossible. Knowledge hinders access to this alternative system of nonknowledge, but for practical purposes, how can one stop using knowledge? As Bataille struggles to confront the impossible in his work, he often reaches this impasse.

I have done everything to know what is knowable and I have looked for that which is unformulatable in my depths. I myself am in a world I recognize as

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<sup>24</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Lyotard 206.



profoundly inaccessible to me: in all the ties that I sought to bind it with, I still don't know what I can conquer, and I remain in a kind of despair.<sup>26</sup>

Operating as a tool to simultaneously legitimize and destabilize his entire project, Bataille's experimentation with the limits of language constantly rearticulates the problem of representation. Although Bataille's synaesthesia evokes what exists beyond language, it cannot escape the text, which always poses an insurmountable limit. What is at stake in Bataille's apparent failure to represent that which evades representation: the sensual, the unthinkable, the void? As Bataille uses synaesthetic language in an attempt to evoke transgressive/transcendent responses in his readers, to describe the impossible, it becomes almost irrelevant to question whether or not his synaesthetic experiments succeed or fail. While Bataille skirts the limits of possibility in *Story* with synaesthesia, both his successes and failures always point out the difficulty for language to transcend its own boundaries. Since the impossible cannot be imagined, much less written about, Bataille's synaesthesia in *Story* begins to suggest the possibility of the impossible, but ends in paradox.

Michel Foucault argues that this instability is Bataille's greatest achievement in *Story of the Eye*. Through his constant attempts to renegotiate the limits of impossibility, using synaesthesia to link dissonant objects, Bataille is able to access deeper questions about the efficacy of existing linguistic systems. In other words, perhaps it is his failure that makes his work valuable.

Our efforts are undoubtedly better spent in trying to speak of this experience and in making it speak from the depths where its language fails, from precisely the place where words escape it, where the subject who speaks has just vanished, where the spectacle topples over before an upturned eye – from where Bataille's death has recently placed his transgression of his texts, that they will protect those who seek a language for the thought of the limit, that they will serve as a dwelling-place for what may already be a ruined project.<sup>27</sup>

Bataille's use of synaesthetic language to articulate the impossible emerges as a portal to imagining a world unbounded by text – however technically successful his synaesthesia may be. A “ruined project?” Perhaps, although as Foucault suggests, the impossible begins at the point where language fails.

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<sup>26</sup> Georges Bataille, *Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn. Press, 2004) 113.

<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 31.



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